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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000016

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SUBJECT: ANTIDOTE TO THE REGIME: THE DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT'S
QUIET DETERMINATION

REF: RANGOON 13

Classified By: CDA, a.i. Ronald McMullen for Reasons 1.5 (B,D)

¶11. (C) Summary: On January 4, the 56th anniversary of Burma's independence, pro-democracy political parties and supporters held quiet, but well-attended, commemorative events in Rangoon. In contrast to the regime's official ceremonies, heavily militarized functions that trumpeted the SPDC's self-proclaimed accomplishments (reftel), the pro-democracy events emphasized Burma's early struggle for independence and democracy and the unfinished business of achieving a government "for the people and by the people." Hundreds of party members and supporters braved the intimidating presence of military intelligence agents to be seen and counted at events sponsored by the Veteran Politicians and the NLD. End Summary.

The Veterans: Return Power to the People

¶12. (U) Early on independence day, the Veteran Politicians, a pro-democracy association of former government and military officials, hosted a ceremony attended by over 400 guests and representatives of political parties and organizations. Among the attendees were several elderly survivors of the "We-Burma Association" (a nationalist movement founded in the 1930s), members of the NLD Central Executive Committee, representatives of the UNLD and UNA (ethnic democracy coalitions), Members-Elect of Parliament, and members of the Committee to Represent the People's Parliament (CRPP). The U.S. Embassy was the only diplomatic mission in attendance at the Veterans' ceremony, which was held in the warehouse of privately owned Rangoon factory.

¶13. (U) Thakin Thein Pe, Chairman of the Veteran Politicians, criticized the regime for repression and harassment and called for an investigation into the May 30 Depayin attack on NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi. He expressed hope that in the new year the "people's power" would be returned to the people of Burma, but questioned whether the regime's "road map" would achieve reconciliation given unresolved issues associated with the National Convention abandoned in 1996.

¶14. (U) In a "Commemorative Appeal," the Veterans reissued their 1999 call for tripartite talks among the SPDC, the NLD, and the ethnic nationalities; criticized the regime for ignoring the results of the 1990 elections; and called for the unconditional release of all political prisoners.

The NLD: Regaining Independence

¶15. (U) Following the Veterans' ceremony, the NLD held a religious ceremony at a monastery in central Rangoon. Over 700 party members and supporters attended the event (we were again the only diplomatic mission in attendance). The monastery's abbot delivered a passionate sermon in which he muted direct criticism of the SPDC, but cited the Buddha's pursuit of spiritual independence as a model for the current struggle to achieve basic freedoms.

¶16. (U) NLD CEC member U Than Tun responded to the sermon with a brief speech in which he criticized the regime's closing of party offices. He described Buddhism as the country's only reliable institution, having survived both the British and the Japanese, and noted that religion (as opposed to the military regime) is capable of helping the Burmese "regain" their independence.

¶17. (U) In an independence day declaration, the NLD called for national reconciliation and dialogue, recalling that the Burmese people had voted for the NLD 1990 with an "overwhelming" desire to restore democratic rights lost when the military seized power in 1962.

Comment: Question Authority - One Day at a Time

¶18. (C) These quiet pro-democracy events paled in comparison to the radical demonstrations of the late 1980s and pro-NLD independence day rallies in previous years. However, it is remarkable that hundreds of political party members and supporters turned out this year given the regime's heightened repression of political dissent. Indeed, military

intelligence agents were active at both functions, filming all speeches and participants, including several NLD members recently released from prison. Pro-democracy activists, unable to meet at shuttered NLD headquarters and subject to arbitrary arrest, found welcome refuge with the Veteran politicians and at the monastery. This was a rare opportunity to defy the authorities - if just for a day. End comment.

McMullen